

Sermon 25/09/22 Luke 16:19 – end

The rich man who did not listen

We have another two-part story from Luke this morning. The first part fairly straightforward. The rich man ignores the poor man in life even though he was in a position to help him with crumbs from his table. But no, they go to the dogs instead, although it seems likely that the dogs were also fed something much better than the scraps from the rich man's table. When they both die it is the poor man who now has everything, and is with Abraham in heaven, and the rich man who suffers, in hell.

There are some subtle details in the story. The rich man begs Abraham to let the poor man help him with just a drop of water but Abraham refuses. 'No' he says, 'You had good things in life while he had only bad. That cannot be reversed'. No crumbs for the poor man, no drop of water for the rich man. When they both die the rich man had a burial. Presumably a fancy funeral with much ritual. It was left to the angels to look after the poor man in death. We are left in no doubt as to the differences in their situations, both in life and in death. They could not have been more different and Luke seems to be very keen to emphasise this point. The gap between them in life and in death was huge.

It starts as the sort of story we expect to find in the gospels. The man poor in life becomes rich in death and the man rich and uncaring in life suffers in death. It is the second part of the story that is fascinating.

Once the rich man grasps that he is going nowhere, that his torment will continue unabated, he stops being concerned only for himself and instead worries for his family. He pleads with Abraham to send a messenger to them to warn them to mend their ways. Abraham refuses. After all there have been warnings from Moses and the prophets that they should listen to. Abraham must be thinking, 'Well we told them so. They should have listened'. The rich man insists that if someone returns from the dead, they will listen but Abraham stands firm. Why would they listen then if they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets?

I have this sort of image of the family confronted by the resurrected poor man explaining the fate of their brother and them dismissing it as 'fake news'. Probably laughing over the whole incident but not taking it seriously. Words like disillusioned and naïve spring to mind. They had been warned but did not listen.

Are we any better at listening today? There is a wealth of information available to us on all manner of topics, not all worthy of our attention. Some backed up by scientifically based research. We all still choose to hear the messages we wish to hear, and not the ones we don't want to hear. Like children sometimes we need to find out by getting it wrong ourselves. I hear my mother's voice. 'I told you so. You should have listened.'

Despite repeated warnings about global warming over several decades there are still people surprised by the floods in Pakistan, heatwaves in Britain and ice sheets melting. Years of health warnings about smoking, drinking and eating too much seem to

have passed some people by. It is easier to ignore the warnings and stick to our old ways than to grasp what we are being told and do something about it.

Is Abraham right? Even a man coming back from the dead would not be sufficient to make people take notice of the warnings they have been given. What would it have taken for them to understand? Even 2000 years later are we any closer to putting into practice the message of Christ, that we must love one another? We see glimpses of understanding, the recent public grief, the support for the NHS during the pandemic, increased awareness of things like food banks. But often these actions can be motivated by our private panic rather than a real understanding of what it means to love each other.

But that message is out there, albeit lost within the noise of all the other messages. Like Elijah we may hear it not in the noise and bustle of daily life but in the quiet of a whisper, audible only when we are listening. It is being shared by churches and individuals across the world. It is our responsibility to help to share that message. Not easy with all the other things out there, the press, social media. But we have one big advantage over these things. Our message can be delivered personally. To be understood we need to free our message from the noise of all the other stuff, we need to make it personal for the hearer, they need to feel that it is for them for today and for the future.

In all the thousands of words that have been expressed about the Queen, one thing has particularly struck me. 'When we talked she

was interested in what I was saying. For those few minutes I was the focus of her attention'. So many people expressed that in different ways. When people spoke she listened and absorbed what was being said.

What better way to show love for each other than by showing interest, by truly listening and taking trouble to understand what is being said to us. How often do we take time out of the noise and rush of everyday life to listen to the messages we really need to hear, to free ourselves from the rubbish and focus on what is important. The rich man and his brothers failed to hear what Moses and the prophets had to say even though it was something they must have heard weekly in the temple or the synagogue for the whole of their lives. Let's not be like them and fail to listen.